

Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee

“Marketing Violence to Children”

Opening Statement of Senator Sam Brownback

May 4, 1999

- Good morning. I want to thank my friend and Commerce Committee Chairman John McCain for agreeing to hold this hearing, and offering a forum for a most important issue.
- The title of this hearing is “Marketing Violence to Children.” Over the past several years, our society seems to grow increasingly flooded with violent images -- movies that depict teens killing their classmates, music with lyrics that glorify suicide, torture, and murder; TV that trivializes the consequences of violence, and video games that simulate real-life killing and give points for each death.
- Much of such entertainment appears to be aimed at children. I’m willing to bet that there aren’t many adults who are huge fans of teen slasher movies, or the music of Cannibal Corpse or Marilyn Manson. At some point, you have to ask “What’s going on here?” Which bring us to where we are today.
- The purpose of this hearing is to examine whether huge entertainment companies are actively targeting children to peddle their violent entertainment products.
- This is not a legislative hearing. There are no bills to be considered on this. Rather, we aim to gather more information on a matter of great public concern, and considerable national urgency. We are not here to point fingers, but to pinpoint the causes of cultural pollution, and seek solutions. We hope to lay the groundwork for a fruitful discussion with industry leaders on how best to address this problem.
- The problem is not one industry, but can be found in virtually every form of entertainment: movies, music, television and video games. Together, they take up the majority of our children’s leisure hours. Studies show that children spend

more time watching TV, listening to music, and playing games than they do with mom or dad. And the messages they get and lessons they learn from this entertainment often run directly counter to the values they learn at home, in school, or at church.

- For example, the movie industry has given us the gift of teen-slasher movies, such as *Scream*, *Disturbing Behavior*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* -- and the critically-acclaimed sequel, *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*.
- In the now-infamous movies *The Basketball Diaries*, which has been cited as a factor in the 1997 shooting of 3 students in Paducah, Kentucky, teen idol Leonardo DiCaprio plays a troubled high school student who fantasizes about striding into school wearing a long, black coat and shooting his classmates and teacher.
- These movies are rated "R" -- not recommended for teens under 18. But the teen cast and high school setting indicates that the targeted audience is precisely the same people who are supposedly discouraged from seeing it -- teens.
- The violence in video games is, in some ways, even more disturbing. A game player does not merely witness violence, he takes an active part. Indeed, the point of such games as *Postal*, *Kingpin*, *Duke Nuke*, *Em*, *Guilty Gear*, and others, is to kill as many characters as possible. The higher the body count, the higher your score.
- Although some of these games are rated "M" for mature audiences, many of the fans are anything but mature. There is much evidence to indicate that game and toy makers are not blind to this fact -- they count on it.
- The ads for some of these games run in *Sports Illustrated for Kids* and game magazines. Moreover, the sale of children's "action figures" which are based on characters from M-rated video games further indicates that these characters are well-known to children, and that this is precisely what the entertainment industry had in mind.
- The music industry is another area where violence-saturated lyrics are marketed to children. Teenagers have traditionally been among the biggest buyers of music albums, and are the most likely to favor music genres such as gangsta rap and shock-rock that appear to glamorize violence.
- Gangsta rap songs, such as the ones posted around this room, often depict drive-by shootings, drug dealing, murder, and gang warfare. Others, such as "Slap a 'Ho" by Dove Shack or "Smack My Bitch Up" extol misogyny.

- Shock-rock songs are more likely to focus on suicide, torture, and death. Examples include songs like “Stripped, Raped and Strangled” by Cannibal Corpse and “Wormboy” or “Irresponsible Hate Anthem” by Marilyn Manson.
- Entertainment industry spokespeople often defend the distribution of such violent music by pointing to the presence of parental advisory labels on the cover of such albums, and claiming that children under 17 are restricted by buying such music. However, compliance with the labeling program is voluntary, and many retailers choose not to restrict purchasing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that few stores do, after all, there don’t appear to be many Marilyn Manson fans over 20.
- The evidence that watching, listening to, and simulating violence harms children grows every year. Both the American Medical Association and the American Association of Pediatrics have warned against exposing children to violent entertainment. And Dr. Leonard Eron, the past president of the American Psychological Association said this: “Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socio-economic levels and all levels of intelligence. The effect is not limited to children already disposed to being aggressive and is not restricted to this country.”
- The games, movies, and albums I’ve mentioned are not put out by some obscure company pushing the envelope. Rather, they are produced, marketed and distributed by subsidiaries of some of the largest, most prestigious companies in the world -- companies which have lent their corporate support to marketing violence.
- We invited the presidents and CEOs of Time-Warner, Seagrams / Universal, Sony, BMG, Viacom, Sega, Nintendo and Hasbro to testify at this hearing. They all refused. It is disappointing that multi-billion dollar communication companies have no one on staff willing to communicate with us on this important issue. However, we do have a very distinguished panel of witnesses before us.
- I am hopeful that their testimony, and our discussion here today, will set the stage for further hearings, and positive action. I don’t think anyone in this room believes that cleaning up our culture is a panacea for all that ails us. But I believe that more and more people think it is a vital --perhaps central -- part of the equation.
- I hope that each of us in here can unite around a common goal and purpose -- that of making our culture, a kinder, gentler, more life-affirming place to raise our children. It may mean losing a buck here and there. But the alternative -- continued cultural debasement -- impoverishes the soul.

- I think our situation was pretty well summed by the father of one of the young boys killed last week in Canada. He said, “We pray that people will see by this incident that lots of things have to change in our society. Lots of things need to be healed. May God have mercy on this broken society, and all the hurting people in it.”
- We have a lot of people hurting in our society, and a lot of things that need to be healed. I hope we can make a start today.
- But first, I’d like to recognize the distinguished Chair of the Commerce Committee, Senator John McCain.

Witness List

Senators Panel

Senator Orrin Hatch

Senator Joseph Lieberman (Senator Lieberman should be invited to sit in on the next panel.)

Panel 1

Archbishop Charles Chaput (pronounced “Sha-pew”) is the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Denver, Colorado.

Jack Valenti is the President and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America.

Dr. William Bennett is currently the co-director of Empower America, and the author of such books as *The Book of Virtues*, and *The Moral Compass*. He previously served as Secretary of Education during the Reagan Administration and the “Drug Czar” during the Bush Administration.

Panel 2

Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman is a psychology professor at the University of Arkansas and author of *On Killing: The Psychological Costs of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. He is a former psychology professor at West Point and Army Ranger.

Daphne White is the Executive Director of the Lion and the Lamb Project, an organization dedicated to providing parents with information on violent entertainment, and on the effects of violent toys and games on children’s behavior.

Doug Lowenstein is the President of the Interactive Digital Software Association, the trade group for the video and PC gaming industry.

Dr. Henry Jenkins is a professor at MIT.

Panel 3

Dr. Rowell Huesmann is a professor of psychology and communication studies at the University of Michigan. He is also the past president of the International Society for Research on Aggression, and a senior research scientist at the Institute for Social Research.

Dr. Diane Levin is professor of education at Wheelock College in Boston, where she teaches early childhood courses on violence and play. She is the author of *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times*, and numerous other books. She is a member of the Massachusetts Violence Prevention Task Force, and is a founder of Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE).